Vocational Education Development: Lessons from Thailand

By Ms. Churairat Sangboonnum
Deputy Permanent Secretary,
Ministry of Education, Thailand

In 2010, from a total population of nearly 66 million there were just over 14 million students enrolled at institutions in Thailand. Of them almost 4.8 million studied at secondary level and around 2.5 million at higher education level. Within the formal system, there are different pathways in to vocational education and training. Some courses are offered as part of the general secondary school curriculum. However, it is at upper secondary level that students can opt to study at one of the country’s vocational education and training colleges. On average, the ratio of students studying in the general stream compared to the vocational stream is 60:40.

At present we have a total 415 colleges, divided into 13 specializations, under the Office of the Vocational Education Commission (OVEC). These colleges awarded technical certificates across a wider range of subject areas. Alternatively students may complete the full cycle of general secondary schooling and then continue their studies in the vocational stream, to earn a technical diploma and/or higher diploma. Those who graduate with a diploma can upgrade this qualification to bachelor degree level subject to a further two years of study in a higher education institute.

Recognizing that people are our most valuable resource and the drivers of sustainable economic growth, Thailand gives high priority to education and training for human resource development. Current government policy focuses on the use of improved technology, higher productivity and enhanced skills, among a better paid workforce. With just three years to go till the establishment of the ASEAN Economic Community, much emphasis is given to language and occupational skills through education policy and programmes geared towards “Education for Employment”.

Among our urgent tasks is to push forward policy to address a mismatch between graduate supply and demand. Particular emphasis is given to upgrading vocational and tertiary education provision with a view to attracting and producing the necessary manpower in terms of both quantity and quality. At present 60% of students opt for general education and only 40% for vocational education. We would like to shift the balance to 50:50 but to do this we must first change people’s perceptions of vocational education and training.

Strategies such as “learn and earn” have certainly contributed to the increased popularity of vocational courses, making it a viable option for those from low income families. One of our successes in this area has been the establishment of Fix It Centres. These centres were originally conceived as a means to make vocational education and training more relevant and mutually beneficial for both students and local communities. Students gain hands on work experience while earning a small income by offering practical assistance
in the form of low cost repairs and maintenance of work tools and machinery or everyday appliances. However, another benefit from bringing the students into the community in this way is that it has helped to develop positive attitudes towards vocational education and training and raise awareness on the kind of skills training opportunities that are available.

Encouraging the participation of vocational students in national and international competitions is also helping to raise the profile of vocational education and training. A recent and perhaps surprising example at the international level, is that Thai vocational students won the Harbin International Collegiate Snow Sculpture Contest championship in January this year. Before that, the King Mongkut's University of Technology (North Bangkok) won the championship prize of the World Robocup Rescue (rescue robot) contest held annually, for three years in a row since 2009. At the national level a range of competitions have been organized, highlighting achievements in various fields such as electronics, accounting and industrial technology, in addition to speech and essay competitions.

Another positive move has been the establishment of Community Learning Centres or CLC, under the Office of Non-Formal and Informal Education. The centres provide access to non-formal and informal education programmes to meet the needs of individuals and communities. There are various types of CLC in Thailand. One of the more successful models is that of the Sub-district Non-formal Education Centre which, in addition to serving the communities educational requirements, act as an information centre, opportunity centre, and community centre. Under the framework of SEAMEO, the Thai Ministry of Education is currently exploring ways to expand the Sub-district Non-formal Education Centres model to other SEAMEO Member Countries under the ten collaborative projects on reaching the unreached to accelerate achievement of the Education for All goals.

However, the most important factor in shifting the enrolment ratio comes from the successful implementation of strategies to improve quality and relevance. If vocational education and training, re-training and re-skilling opportunities are better linked to local, regional and global realities then this will increase the employment prospects of graduates and as a result more students are likely to enroll. Priority areas include improving management and management systems, building partnerships between public and private sector and promoting research and development.

To improve management and management systems, we have looked at ways to maximize available resources through the formation of sector groupings, such as hospitality and tourism, ICT, the automotive industry, home economics, electronics, food and catering, maritime studies, petrochemicals and textiles. Colleges in the same grouping can share their resources, and this includes human resources, as a means to improve quality.

We are also in the process of developing occupational competency standards, professional qualifications, vocational standards and competency-based curricula to create a coherent classification to facilitate
transfer and progression both within and between areas of competence. Levels of competency should be linked to remuneration. Thailand is working closely with relevant bodies in the UK and Australia on developing such a competency based training and qualifications framework. Levels of competency are related to knowledge, skills and performance, and include recognition of prior learning which takes into account the individuals range of work experience, levels of responsibility, and personal autonomy. A pilot framework has been tested in the retail sector through a project between Deeside College, UK, the British Council and the Thai Retail Association. This model is being expanded to other key sectors.

In terms of successful partnerships, we have introduced **Dual Vocational Education and Training (DVET)**. This has played a vital role in developing higher technical skills among the workforce, promoting innovation as well as building managerial expertise. The success of the DVET initiative has prompted an intensification of efforts to build and strengthen the networks for participation among business enterprises, communities, localities, and domestic and international networks.

At the same time, through the promotion of **research and development**, we are now better positioned to support entrepreneurs and local industry. In some areas we have already made significant progress. For example, farm scientists with the Asia Pacific Association of Agricultural Research Institutions (APAARI) position Thailand among the top five developing countries which have contributed to farm research, pushing forward new farm knowledge and technology and other innovations. Another area of strength is the development of alternative energy sources. According to a survey conducted by the Renewable Energy Network for the 21st Century among sixty three biofuel producing countries, Thailand now ranks eighth among the largest biofuel producers in the world.

At this critical moment in time, Thailand is also looking beyond its own borders, recognizing the benefits of regional integration and acknowledging that the future and fortunes of countries are inter-liked. Hence, we participate actively in the regional activities of UNESCO-UNEVOC (the vocational education arm of the UN). We also play an active role in regional organizations such as SEAMEO and ASEAN. I would like to talk briefly about ASEAN since cooperation goes beyond the region with groupings that include ASEAN neighbours, for example, ASEAN Plus 3 (China, Japan and Republic of South Korea).

One of the key purposes of the new ASEAN Charter is to promote a people-oriented ASEAN in which all sectors of society are encouraged to participate in, and benefit from, the process of ASEAN integration and community building. In establishing the ASEAN Social and Cultural Community, facilitating universal access to education for increased employability, good citizenship, and as a means of empowerment and life-long learning have been highlighted under the ASEAN Plan of Actions. The Plan emphasizes the enhancement of improved standards and increased access to
education through networking and institutional collaboration. By developing leadership skills, entrepreneurship, and technical and vocational abilities, we can ensure that ASEAN youth have a better future.

As areas of mutual concern, ASEAN Member Countries have already identified and conducted studies on the need to upgrade the quality of teachers, improve English language training, integrate ICTs effectively and efficiently in education and ensure that vocational and technical education is both relevant and up-to-date. It is these mutual concerns, combined with shared aspirations in relation to building the region’s potential in the global market and improving the lives and livelihoods of our peoples that provides the incentive for us to work together as one community.

This raises the issue of how we are to measure success and how we can compare the outcomes in different countries. As a region we would undoubtedly benefit from the development of comprehensive ASEAN educational standards as part of a broader educational quality framework. Standardization is linked to the creation of a truly borderless region with increased educational opportunities, the free flow of ideas, enhanced mobility among a highly skilled and talented workforce, and the realization of alternative career paths. For this there must be agreed criteria for the recognition of institutions and accreditation of courses.

It has been my privilege and pleasure to share with you some of the lessons learned in Thailand as we monitor progress on the various initiatives I have mentioned. As demonstrated by our participation in this conference, Thailand is keen to share its experiences with other countries and to work together on areas of mutual concern. I would like to complement the organizers on their successful hosting of the Conference on Development Policy Options and thank all concerned for the kind hospitality we have received.

**********************